

Search and Rescue:

Life in the Balance



SEARCH AND RESCUE: LIFE IN THE BALANCE

SUMMARY

In San Luis Obispo County, the responsibility for search and rescue lies within the Sheriff's Department. Though not in daily use, this service requires a high level of training, practice and an ongoing state of readiness in order to be effective. Currently San Luis Obispo Search and Rescue (SAR) consists of approximately 50 volunteers with a County Sheriff Sergeant who acts as a liaison between the group and the Sheriff's Department. SAR believes this is not an adequate number of trained volunteers to handle a potential major disaster or to provide mutual aid to other counties, as the majority of SAR volunteers have jobs and are unable to deploy for extended periods. Due to the nature of volunteer organizations only a percentage of Search and Rescue is available at any given time for a "call out." SAR encourages interested members of the public to join their organization.

The SAR unit is the largest specialized unit in the Sheriff's Department and is a 100% volunteer effort. Tasked with conducting searches for missing people, activities encompass anything from an overdue hiker; to an Alzheimer's patient who has walked away from home; to assisting law enforcement in locating evidence hidden or abandoned during the commission of a crime. The unit includes:

- A canine team
- A mountain bike team
- Emergency medical technician(s)

- Technical personnel for high and low angle rescues
- Personnel trained in swift water and off-road rescue
- Radio equipped vehicles.

SAR also responds to mutual aid requests from other counties throughout the state.

The Unit provides emergency medical support at the Oceano Dunes State Vehicle Recreation Area (Dunes) on holidays and summer season weekends. They respond to medical emergencies within the Dunes to treat and stabilize patients until the arrival of ambulance personnel, if needed. In past years, SAR received \$1,000 annually to assist this effort from the California Department of Parks, operators of the Dunes. This income source is no longer available due to budget cuts.

According to California State Emergency Services Agency personnel, funding for search and rescue throughout the State has become problematic, given current economic conditions. Volunteers form the “backbone” of search and rescue in the state, without whose selfless dedication, search and rescue efforts could be seriously compromised.

Currently, county funding for SAR is combined with two other volunteer auxiliary units -- the Dive Team and the Sheriff’s Posse. The county’s budget for fiscal year 2010 contains \$35,227 in net expenditures which are to be divided, by the Sheriff’s Department, amongst the three auxiliaries. There does not appear to be a category for donations or similar revenue generating source and the Sheriff’s Department does not allow fundraising unless a specific need has been identified and permission is granted from management. Further, management states that SAR funding requests have been met by the Department and they are unaware of any unmet needs.

Unlike sworn Sheriff’s Department personnel, SAR members must provide their own equipment and uniforms, as well as pay for specialized training. The unit currently has no four wheel drive vehicle for use by the Sheriff’s liaison for off-road situations or towing various equipment items.

METHOD

The San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury initiated this report as a result of concerns for the provision and continuation of critical search and rescue services during this period of prolonged economic turndown.

To complete this inquiry, Grand Jurors conducted interviews with key SAR personnel, including the Sheriff's Department staff and management, as well as State Emergency Services Agency staff. In addition, a comprehensive review of SAR training manuals, financial information and established standards of governing agencies and organizations was performed. Monthly meetings and training programs were observed, and the volunteer application process was reviewed.

NARRATIVE

On February 28, 2003, President George W. Bush signed Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-5 establishing a national management system to respond to major disasters, domestic emergencies and terrorist attacks. This required the development of a National Incident Management System (NIMS) to provide a consistent nationwide approach for federal, state and local government to work together responding to incidents regardless of cause, size or complexity. NIMS provides a set of standardized procedures and systems to improve interoperability among jurisdictions. As an element of this structure, Search and Rescue is a deployable asset to the Emergency Management Services.

California Government Code Section 26614 provides authority to County Sheriffs for search and rescue operations. All fifty-eight (58) California counties utilize the Sheriff's Department to provide these services. Some California counties use paid law enforcement personnel for search and rescue operations; some a mix of paid and volunteer staff, while some operate with all volunteers. Counties, including SLO, provide services outside their boundaries (mutual aid),

when requested, for some operations requiring either more personnel or specialized equipment/training not available in the requesting county.

The SLO SAR members receive no payment for their services. They are responsible for purchasing their own equipment, uniforms and the cost of their training. Given the specialized nature of the various SAR teams (mountain bike, canine, medical), equipment can be extremely expensive. While the Sheriff's Department does provide some funding including mileage reimbursement, many other items required to do the job are not provided. When available, the Department provides funds from special sources (off-highway motor fines, etc.) for the purchase of items such as all terrain vehicles, radios, trucks and equipment trailers. Funding is approved based on priorities identified within the Sheriff's Auxiliary Units. However, given recent budget cuts in the Department, this funding is not assured.



Highly trained and certified volunteer members of the team design and conduct basic trainings within the team that meet or exceed national standards. Each team member has, at a minimum, Incident Command System Training level, Title 22 First Aid, C.P.R., hazardous material training and National Association for Search and Rescue Technician II training. Lack of funding prevents SAR team leaders from attending some advanced trainings or participating in multi-county/state trainings which would provide valuable additional knowledge and expertise.

In an interview, the Grand Jury was told that funds for SAR training, along with other auxiliary units, are combined with those for sworn law enforcement personnel under one budget category. Requests for advanced SAR training must be made and are then evaluated and provided, based on the needs of the whole Department. It does not appear that SAR prepares and submits formal requests for training funds to the Sheriff's Department. Department management believes that there are currently no unmet SAR training needs.

A majority of the volunteers have specialized training and offer the following capabilities:

- Search Management
- California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA) Certified Mission ready search dog handler and K9s trained in air and scent trailing and cadaver retrieval
- Emergency Medical Technician 1
- Amateur radio operators
- Physician, nurse, physician's assistant
- Radio dispatch
- 4x4 radio equipped vehicles
- Technical rescue - high and low angle
- Project lifesaver technicians
- Swift water rescue support
- Man tracking
- Mountain bike team
- Off road 4x4 and A.T.V. trained personnel

Over the years the Sheriff's Department has acquired specialized equipment for use by SAR, including all terrain vehicles (ATVs), radios, command and medical trailers, generators and communication vehicles. Missing from the above list, is a four wheel drive vehicle for use by the Sheriff's Department Sergeant/liaison, who attempts to respond to every call. In the recent past, a four wheel drive vehicle was loaned to the SAR liaison by the North County Sheriff's Substation. This appeared to work well, permitting required equipment to be stored in the vehicle, always ready, thus cutting down on response time. However, Department management

feels that the number of SAR call outs does not justify assigning a specific vehicle. In its investigation, the Grand Jury found that should a call out occur during the work week, the Sergeant/liaison would have to drive to where SAR equipment is stored, load the equipment into his personal vehicle, find an available four wheel vehicle and transfer equipment. This creates a significant decrease in response time. In 2008, SAR responded to 25 requests for assistance and 17 in 2009.

SAR meets monthly. New members are required to go through a full background check, fingerprinting and interview to determine acceptability. An informal commitment of two years is



asked in order to ensure a positive return for the amount of training involved. Specialized teams each require additional training with the K9 teams requiring the greatest commitment of time. Training and practical exercises are regularly performed to maintain skill levels and annual recertification. Currently, all SAR volunteers must complete required trainings and be certified. There is minimal non-certified support

for basic administrative assistance, including fundraising, grant writing, web site development, and recruitment. Volunteers are provided liability and workers' compensation insurance by the State EMA, through the county.

As a result of this investigation, several interested Grand Jurors have attended SAR meetings, both to learn more for this report, and for personal interest. One Grand Jury member, in fact, recently joined the group and is beginning the multi-year training program.¹

¹ This report of the San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury was approved without the vote of this Grand Jury member. To reduce or avoid any perception of conflict of interest, this Grand Jury member abstained from the final vote on this report.

FINDINGS

1. The Sheriffs' Departments provide search and rescue services in all fifty-eight (58) California counties.
2. Other counties utilize paid law enforcement, a mix of paid and volunteer staff, or all volunteers to provide these services.
3. SLO Search and Rescue is composed entirely of unpaid volunteers.
4. SAR volunteers are reimbursed for "approved" mileage but, unlike sworn Sheriff's Department personnel, are responsible for uniforms, equipment, advanced training and some supplies.
5. SAR certified personnel provide basic volunteer training; often team leaders are not able to attend advanced or multi-county/state trainings due to lack of funding. SAR has not in the past routinely submitted a list of requested trainings for inclusion in the Sheriff's budget.
6. SAR is not permitted to engage in fundraising activities without prior approval from the Sheriff's Department. Permission for fundraising activities requires the identification of a "justifiable" unmet need that could not otherwise be provided by the Department. The Department is not currently aware of any such unmet needs.
7. SAR service to the state operated Oceano Dunes Vehicle Recreation Area is not funded. SAR often provides the only on-site medically trained personnel.
8. SAR currently does not have a volunteer(s) assigned for generating funding, administrative functions, recruitment or public awareness; all volunteers are "field

trained”.

9. SAR believes the current number of volunteers (50+/-) is inadequate to handle a major disaster or provide adequate mutual aid to other counties.
10. The Department’s Sergeant/liaison to SAR does not have a readily available four wheel drive vehicle to transport/tow equipment for call outs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SAR should develop a list of needs for inclusion in the Sheriff’s budget in time for consideration of the next county budget hearings, to include: (Findings 4, 5)
 - a. cost of basic equipment which is required for a new volunteer.
 - b. costs of desired advanced training or other anticipated costs.
 - c. a miscellaneous contingency fund.
 2. The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors should, to the extent possible, provide an allowance for uniforms, equipment, training/advanced training and supplies for SAR volunteers, similar to sworn staff in the Sheriff’s Department. (Findings 4, 5)
 3. If county funding for #2 is not available, SAR should be authorized, by the Sheriff’s Department, to operate fund raising events and solicit donations or sponsorships to help defray the costs of uniforms, training, equipment, etc. (Finding 6).
 4. SAR, with the assistance of county personnel, should pursue funding from the California Department of Parks to subsidize rescue work in the Oceano Dunes. (Finding 7)
 5. SAR, to the extent possible, should recruit volunteers in the following areas: (Finding 8)
 - a. public relations/sponsorship solicitation
 - b. fund raising
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- c. website development
 - d. grant writing
 - e. volunteer recruitment (certified and non certified-operations)
6. SAR should increase membership by up to 50 additional members. (Finding 9)
7. Necessary SAR equipment should be stored or kept near the Sergeant/liaison's work station or kept in an available four wheel drive vehicle at his post to reduce response time. (Finding 10)

COMMENDATION

San Luis Obispo Search and Rescue is composed of a group of dedicated individuals, willing to undergo extensive, time-consuming training, purchase costly equipment, and spend countless, sometimes dangerous, hours in the service of others. The service community they have established consists of volunteers from all walks of life -- from college students to physicians, from firefighters to housewives -- whose task it is to provide rescue services to any one of us. This group of people is as good as their days are long, and their selfless service to the community is highly commended.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors is required to respond to Recommendations 2 and 4. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 3, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department is required to respond to Recommendations 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at

the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 3, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The San Luis Obispo County Search and Rescue Unit is required to respond to Recommendations 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 3, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The mailing addresses for delivery are:

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Charles S. Crandall Superior Court of California 1050 Monterey Street San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93402